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# *WEEKLY SUMMARY*

## *Special Report*

***Soviet Relations with the Baathists in Iraq and Syria***

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## SOVIET RELATIONS WITH THE BAATHISTS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

Moscow has made a heavy investment in Syria and Iraq, so far without gaining the influence it wants. The USSR provides both countries with virtually all their military equipment, and extends considerable economic aid as well. It has not acquired much leverage, however, over the foreign and domestic policies of the two countries, both of which are suspicious of its close relationship with Egypt.

The Soviets find it advisable not to meddle in the volatile political situations in Syria and Iraq that have produced numerous coups d'etat in the past decade. The Baathists do not need Soviet diplomatic backing to counter US support for Israel, nor do they require Soviet help at the UN.

Because of the turbulent internal situation in both countries, the fortunes of local Communist parties have fluctuated greatly, and the Baathist regimes have rebuffed Communist proposals to form "national front" governments. Recent Soviet press commentary suggests that Moscow is in the dark once again regarding current trends in Damascus and Baghdad, and has decided to wait out still another difficult period in relationships that have known many vicissitudes.

### THE COMMUNISTS AND THE BAATH

Baathism stands for many things that the Soviet Union supports in the Middle East, including Arab solidarity and socialism, and the elimination of Western influence. Unlike Nasir's Arab Socialist Union, which acknowledges the role of religion in political life, Baathism is strictly secular. It is the only significant non-Communist Arab political movement with an ideological base. In organization, the Baath resembles a conventional Communist party, utilizing cells and an international council that coordinates the activities of various national branches. The Syrian and Iraqi regimes, however, are competitive with each other, rather than adherents to a unified philosophy and leadership.

The Baath is ideologically attractive to the Soviet Union in that it gives lip service to the ideals of democratic government. Being realists, however, the Soviets appreciate even more the fact that the Baath does not depend on a single dynamic leader. All too often, Soviet political fortunes in the "third world" have been tied to the fate of a strong charismatic leader, and Moscow's influence usually ended with that leader's demise. The Soviet experience after the ouster of Sukarno in Indonesia and Nkrumah in Ghana has made Moscow more sensitive to the hazards of being overcommitted to one-man regimes. The Soviets still have the problem of establishing and maintaining influence in countries without an institutionalized political life, however, and Moscow's interest in cultivating governmental relations with the Baathists illustrates an approach it has increasingly turned to throughout the third world. Like Nasir's Arab Socialist Union and Boumediene's National Liberation Front, the Baathists are ideologically committed to a "path of noncapitalist development" and share other doctrinaire tenets akin to Marxism. In the case of Syria, Moscow's relations with the Baathists have

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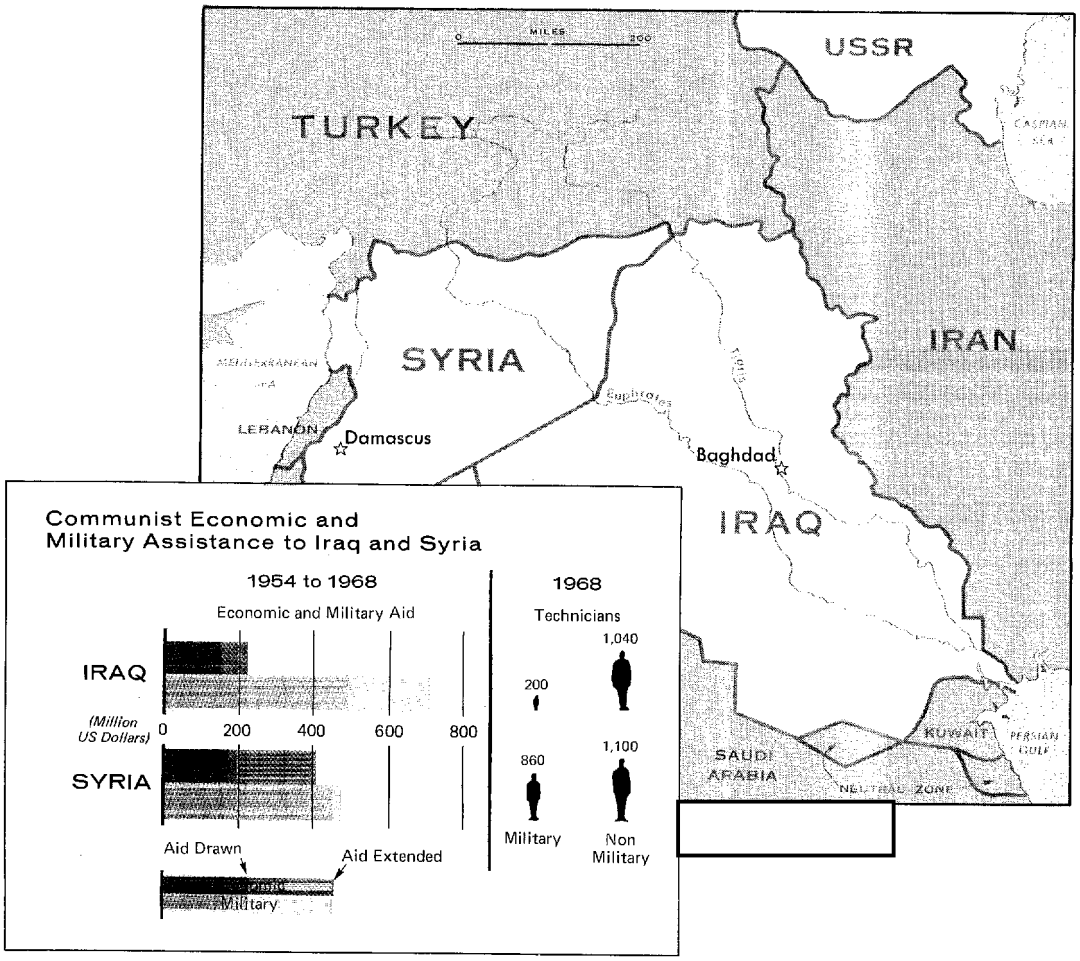
earned some freedom for the Syrian Communist Party.

In practice, the Soviets have had more problems with the Baathists than with other leftist regimes in the Middle East. Although there are more Communists in Iraq than in any other Arab country, they have been in eclipse since repressed by the Baathists in 1963. Following the Baathist military coup in February of that year, Communist leaders were jailed, and party activity largely ceased. An attempted Communist coup later that year was easily and brutally crushed, leading to a series of executions. The Communist Party subsequently has split into three factions—a pro-Soviet group, a pro-Chinese group, and a militant faction that tried but failed to spark a revolt among the minority tribes in southern Iraq.

Members of the Syrian Communist Party have not been dealt with as harshly as their counterparts in Iraq, but they nonetheless have been kept in line. The Baathists supported the union with Egypt in 1958 because they thought it

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would help prevent a Communist take-over. The Baathist coup in March 1963 did not lead to repression of the Communists because the Baathists looked to them as allies against the pro-Nasir forces in Damascus. Currently, the Syrian Communist Party officially supports the Baathist regime, although it follows the Soviet line on certain key political issues. The party, for example, recently urged Arab terrorists to be "more responsible" in their political activities, and its delegation to the recent international Communist conference went along in supporting the Security Council resolution of 1967 for a political solution to the Arab-Israeli crisis. The party's 3,000 members make it the third largest Communist Party in the Arab world, and a Communist now holds a cabinet post as minister of communications and foreign trade.

Despite the size of the Communist parties in Syria and Iraq, and Moscow's considerable economic investment in the two countries, the Soviets have been powerless to change the numerous Baathist policies that have not been in their interest. The Baathist regime in Damascus has resisted Soviet pressures on it to support a political solution to the Arab-Israeli crisis, to cease provoking Israel with its support of the Palestinian terrorist organizations, or even to enter into closer relations with other radical Arab countries. The Soviets oppose these aspects of Syrian policy also because they conflict with Nasir's more moderate policies in the Middle East, which have Moscow's backing.

Moscow's attitude toward Nasir is the key to understanding much of the USSR's policy throughout the area. Since Moscow began to play an active role among the littoral states of the Mediterranean, dating back to its sponsorship of a Czechoslovak arms deal with Egypt in 1955, it has assigned a higher priority to its relations with Cairo than to those with any other Arab state. Moscow has political influence in Egypt partly because Cairo relies on Soviet support to counter US efforts on behalf of Israel. Syria and Iraq do not share this concern, and do not require Soviet backing at the UN either. Nasir has other problems that do not concern the Baathist states, and this also partially explains his more cautious behavior, which is to Moscow's liking. Nasir cannot afford to alienate such conservative states as Kuwait, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, which subsidize him to the tune of $244 million a year. The Egyptians must also honor the facade of Arab solidarity, a facade which is buttressed by propaganda support from the Soviet Union.

## CURRENT SOVIET RELATIONS WITH SYRIA

The last-minute cancellation of Syrian President Al-Atasi's trip to the USSR in May 1969 reflects the current uncertainty in Moscow's relations with Damascus. Since the political turmoil in February that left Defense Minister Hafiz Asad in control of the regime, Soviet commentary has wavered between optimistic and pessimistic accounts of events in Damascus. A few days after the cabinet reshuffle, the Syrian Communist Party attacked Asad, charging that his ascendancy

**Syrian Defense Minister Hafiz Asad**

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would endanger the unity of "progressive" forces in the Middle East and weaken Syria's ties with Moscow. [redacted]

[redacted]

By the middle of March, the USSR itself began to admit that the Syrian power struggle did not bode well for Moscow's influence in Damascus. Soviet news media initially tended to play down reports that there were serious disagreements within the Baathist leadership, and attacked the Western press for suggesting that such disagreements existed. Izvestia conceded on 19 March, however, that there were indeed "complications" within the left-wing factions, and "differences" among them in solving the Arab-Israeli crisis and dealing with other Arab states. More recently, Pravda noted the need for unity in Syria so that "progressive" policies could be continued, and repeated Bakdash's warning against the "feverish subversion" by reactionary forces in Damascus.

Moscow's uncertainty may be related to reports, thus far unconfirmed, that Asad will try to loosen Syria's dependence on the USSR. The Syrians have been looking for a friend in the West for more than a year, however, without any success. Even if Damascus should decide that it was no longer necessary to appear closely allied with the USSR, it must continue to rely on Soviet military aid and will probably also depend on continued economic aid. 25X1 25X1

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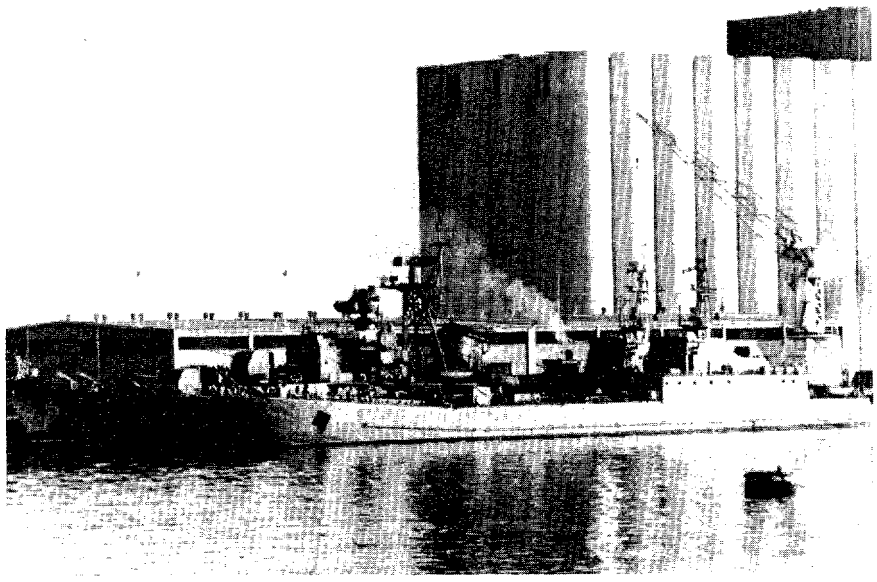

**Soviet Ship Unloading Military Supplies in Latakia**

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Soviet military and economic aid is as much in Moscow's interest as it is in Damascus', their differences notwithstanding. Meanwhile, there is no evidence that Moscow, in order to influence internal Syrian politics, is threatening to suspend its aid grants, particularly for the $133-million Euphrates Dam project. The Soviets have not cut back on aid to the Syrian railroad system and oil industry.

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The USSR continues to deliver military equipment to Syria, but at reduced levels from the period following the six-day war in 1967. At least twenty MIG-17s were delivered to Latakia earlier this year, the first aircraft delivery since December 1968, when two SU-7s arrived. The aircraft deliveries are in addition to military cargoes which have arrived at the rate of two a month since the first of the year. The cargoes are believed to contain tanks, armored personnel carriers, military vehicles, small arms, and ammunition. The two sides have also agreed to reschedule the visit of the Syrian president and chief of staff, who now are expected to arrive in Moscow later this month.

The Syrians, in their search for other sources of aid, are even suggesting that China would be a likely benefactor of Arab nationalism. When the Al-Atasi trip was suddenly postponed, Syrian Chief of Staff Talas, who was to be part of the delegation to Moscow, announced that he would be leaving immediately for Peking in response to a year-old invitation. This was the first Syrian military delegation to travel to Peking to discuss military aid. Talas' trip serves to forestall any Soviet expectations of expanded influence in Syrian politics. The Baathists in Iraq made a similar pitch last summer when the Foreign Ministry announced that it would try to strengthen relations with the "socialist camp, particularly the Soviet Union and the Chinese People's Republic." Syria provided a new twist in this regard last month, becoming the first Arab state to announce the establishment of diplomatic relations with Albania. Syria, however, also recognized East Germany, thereby satisfying a Soviet objective.

**Syrian Army Chief of Staff and Deputy Defense Minister Mustafa Talas**

The Syrians, sensing their isolation, have raised the specter of rapprochement with the Chinese in order to add to their own self-importance as well as to nettle the Soviets. Moscow probably does not believe that the Chinese are potential rivals as the chief purveyor of military and economic aid, but is concerned that the Chinese will encourage the kind of Baathist adventurism that it opposes.

## SOVIET RELATIONS WITH IRAQ

Moscow is reserved in its attitude toward the Baathist regime in Iraq just as it is uncertain regarding Syria. Baghdad's internal politics, like Syria's, have been shaky, but the question of Moscow's presence in Iraq—which is comparatively quite limited—does not appear to be an element of instability. The Iraqi regime explicitly

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approved the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and, more than any other Arab government, linked the liberalizing movement in Prague with Zionist influence. When an Iraqi military delegation failed to get a new arms agreement from the Soviets last fall, there was no carping in the Baghdad press. The Iraqis tried to appear satisfied with the top-level attention given the group, just as they were with Moscow's warm reception of Foreign Minister Shaykhli in March 1969.

Both visits indicated that the two sides wanted to give the impression of amicable relations while trying to cover up for the lack of movement on substantive issues. The communiqué winding up the Shaykhli visit hardly mentioned the subject of Soviet aid, and there was no sign that Moscow had moved Iraq toward acceptance of a political settlement in the Middle East. Instead, the communiqué emphasized bilateral agreement on international issues unrelated to the Middle East, such as Nigerian unity, European security, and West German "revanchism." East Germany was highly praised in the communiqué, thereby presaging Iraq's recognition of Pankow, which occurred last month.

Another Iraqi military delegation visited Moscow in June, after the Soviets had twice postponed the visit, but there has been no hint of a new arms agreement. Baghdad, which suffered little loss in the Arab-Israeli war, currently has a larger arms inventory than before the war, and the Soviets may want to hold Arab arms at the present level for the near future.

In fact, the delivery of Soviet military equipment under an earlier agreement has slackened in recent months. Since the last half of 1968, when about twelve SU-7s and 35 MIG-21s arrived in Iraq, the only equipment identifiable as being of Soviet origin was two minesweepers that arrived in March.

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In 1968 the Iraqis also signed military agreements with Czechoslovakia for jet trainers, armored personnel carriers, and antiaircraft guns, and with Bulgaria for chemical equipment and uniforms.

Meanwhile, the Soviet press has begun to show Moscow's irritation with the Iraqi Baathist regime. Pravda pointedly carried a statement by the Iraqi Communist Party on 5 April criticizing the Baathist arrest of "progressive" national elements (primarily the Communists). The statement called for a general amnesty for political prisoners and an end to the ban on "progressive" political activity. Pravda also noted that the government included too many members of the 1963 Baathist regime that carried out the "cruel repression" of Iraqi leftists.

In addition to the jailing of Communists, there are other sources of discontent in Soviet-Iraqi relations. Pravda ran a three-part series on the Iraqi Kurds last winter in which it reported that Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani was in complete control of northern Iraq. Several Iraqi diplomats expressed their distaste for the series, dismissing it as "distorted." The Soviet press has echoed Iraqi Communist support for Kurdish autonomy within the Iraqi republic. This can only play on Baathist anxieties, since the regime once feared that the Soviets were secretly passing funds to Barzani so that he could pursue his fight against the Iraqi regime.

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## OUTLOOK

Moscow presumably will take a "carrot and stick" approach toward both Baathist governments until it has a clearer idea of how the

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political future is shaping up in Iraq and Syria. And because these two countries are mutually hostile, it will behoove the Soviets not to take sides in their political struggles. Moscow will put the best possible face on the high-level visits that take place—such as those of the Iraqi foreign minister and defense minister—but will probably defer any decision on additional arms agreements.

In this way, the Soviets will hope to maintain a free hand to put pressure on the Baathists regarding their minority problems, the composition of their governments, and the role of "progressives" in their daily political life. As long as Baathist politics remain dominated by the military, the Soviet Union will retain a modicum of influence. Western sources of arms are hard to come by for radical, underdeveloped countries, and the Soviets—as the principal supplier of the Arab world—are in an unrivaled position. Nevertheless, this position will not permit Moscow to influence the type of socialism being developed by the Baathist regimes.

Moscow has never had much political influence in Syria, a xenophobic country that has known little other than periodic power struggles over the past 20 years. Moscow's virtual inability to moderate Damascus' hard-line posture has been, in fact, the only constant factor in the shifting Soviet-Syrian relationship. During this period, the Syrian Army—dominated by radically oriented officers—has emerged as the sole arbiter of politics, and Moscow has always been careful in dealing with the erratic and unstable regimes that the generals have produced. Since last fall there has been a definite shift of influence within the Baathist power structure in favor of the military group headed by Asad. This will probably lead to some slippage in Moscow's access in Damascus, where the Soviet monopoly on Syrian military and economic aid has never resulted in a commensurate degree of political leverage.

Moscow will not come down hard on the Baathists in Syria on these issues because it does not want to add to the points of friction between the two countries. Soviet private and public statements suggest that Moscow, while not approving of the Syrian-sponsored fedayeen threat to Lebanon, is not inclined to apply any effective pressure on Damascus to put a stop to it. Even if the Soviets were inclined to lean on the Syrians, they would still be unable to achieve the desired results. Moscow realizes that its limited working relationship with Defense Minister Asad and the military class that he represents is preferable to having no access at all. Also, the anti-Western orientation of the Syrian Government and its reliance on Soviet aid is appreciated in Moscow.

It was inevitable that the Soviets would be faced with a difficult round of arms talks once Arab military inventories had reached prewar levels and Arab-Israeli tensions worsened. Moscow will face an even more difficult decision when the Arabs feel the need to counter Israel's strides toward a nuclear capability. The Soviets realize that additional military equipment could spark another round in the arms race in the Middle East, threatening further use of such arms. The Soviets know that equipment deficiencies are not the cause of recent Arab military debacles and, for that reason, their efforts on behalf of Syria and Iraq have stressed training and organization. There is very little that Moscow can do to remedy the most serious Arab deficiencies, morale and motivation.

The nettlesome day-to-day problems that the Arabs face vis-a-vis Israel could lead to further crises involving Moscow. As the Arabs grow more frustrated and impatient over continued Israeli occupation of their territory, and it becomes more obvious that the combined efforts of the US and the Soviet Union can do nothing about that occupation, the chances for a new round of

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fighting will increase. Indeed, Soviet equipment and training could eventually convince the Arabs that their military proficiency has been "regained" and that it is indeed time for new hostilities. It is likely, therefore, that while the Soviets will try to dispel any Arab notions that Soviet arms, training, and military doctrine were responsible for the last defeat, they will also make the Arabs aware that the excellence of Soviet arms will not in itself bring victory against Israel.

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